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Hope In the Shadow of Despair

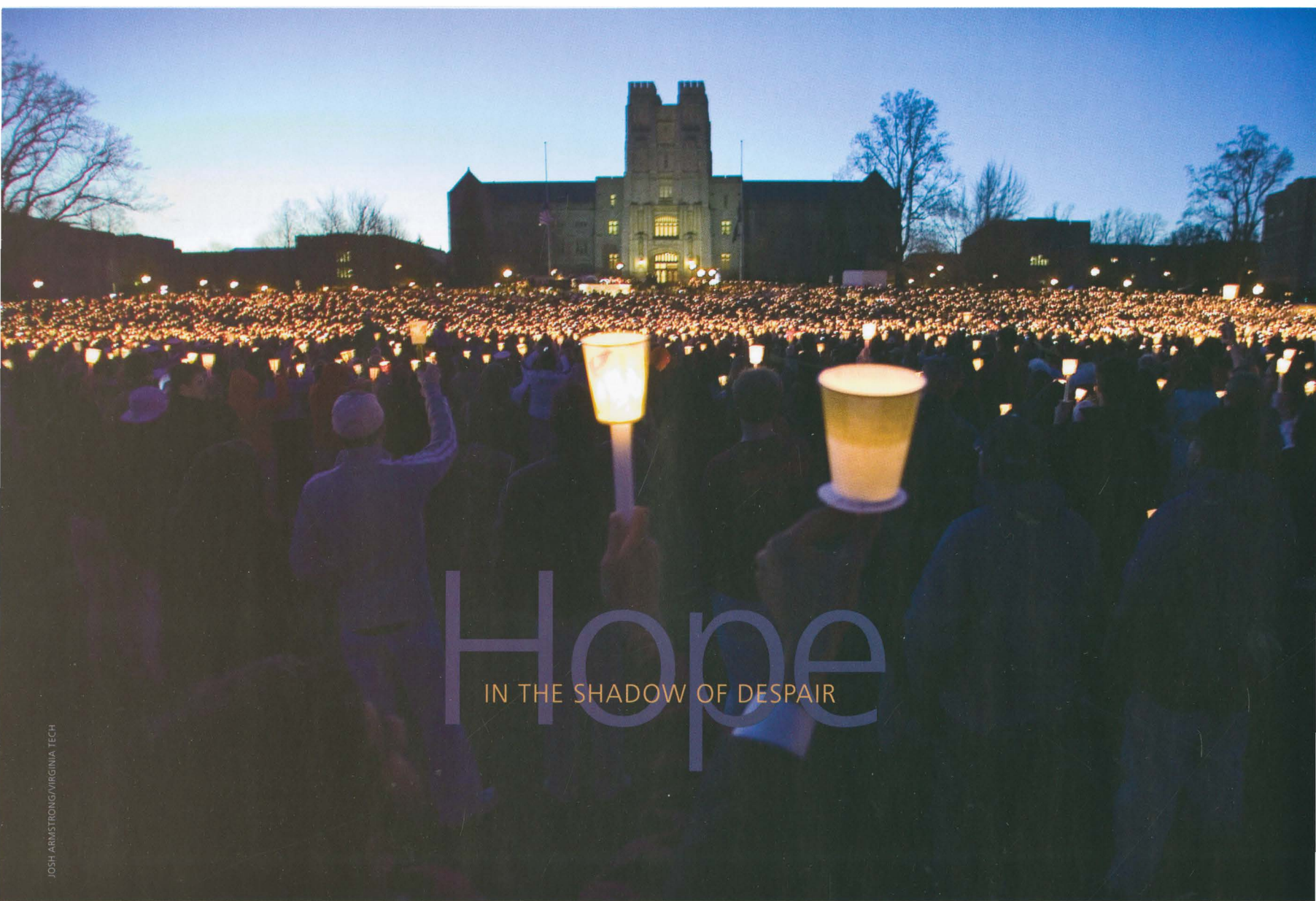
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JOSH ARMSTRONG/VIRGINIA TECH

Hope

IN THE SHADOW OF DESPAIR

BY BILL KING

Editor's note: In the aftermath of the February 14 shootings at Northern Illinois University, this article takes on added relevance.

REFLECTIONS ON LAST SPRING'S TRAGEDY AT VIRGINIA TECH — AND THE ONGOING CHALLENGE TO HEAL AND FORGIVE.

Who knows what triggers a particular memory? I was waiting to speak at the convocation following the April 16 tragedy at Virginia Tech when I remembered a moment from more than 30 years ago.

On this day when our basketball arena was filled to overflowing with a crowd both raucous and stunned, and CNN cameras prepared to beam the event across the country, I recalled a dreary afternoon in Stratford-upon-Avon, when I was part of Furman's Fall in England program. John Crabtree was taking us through a scene in *Twelfth Night*. With obvious love for the work, he infused energy into the stuffy room and overcame the torpor of students who had lingered too long in the pubs the night before. His skilled recitation made these lines drip with irony: "Some are born great . . . Some achieve greatness . . . And some have greatness thrust upon them."

As nervous as I was, I smiled, remembering that these are the words of Malvolio, Shakespeare's most pompous prig. Feeling the pressure of speaking in behalf of the entire Christian community — and tempted to take myself way too seriously — that brief memory brought me back to reality. For, of course, it was not greatness that had been thrust upon me, but at most my Warhol-esque 15 minutes of fame.

I was not sitting on that stage because I was particularly insightful or eloquent but because I happened to be the Lutheran campus pastor at Virginia Tech the day the unspeakable occurred last spring. Twenty-three years in one place build familiarity between pastor and administration, so I was asked to speak.

Since that day I have been amazed at how much wisdom is imputed to you because of mere proximity to a major news event. I do not claim to be an expert in crisis ministry, the dynamics of long-term grief or post-traumatic stress disorder. I would not presume to predict how the ongoing recovery of the Blacksburg community will progress. But after almost a year I offer a few observations and reflections arising out of my experiences in the midst of this tragedy.

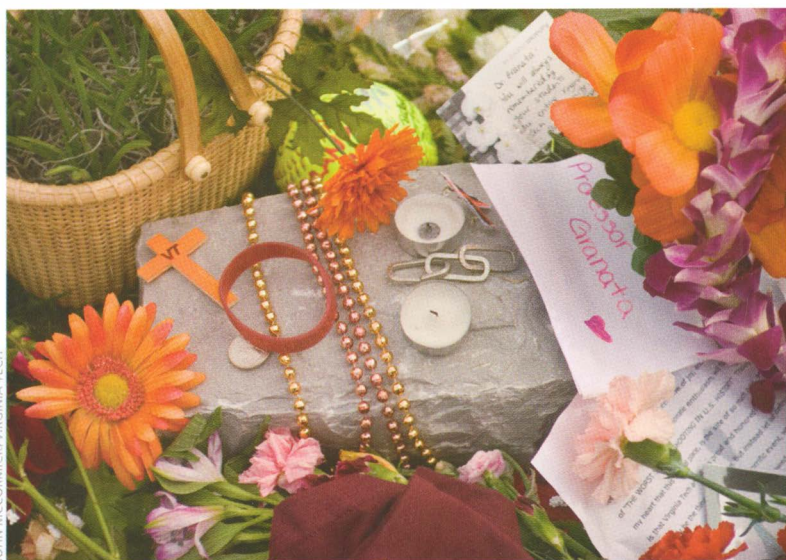
SITTING IN SILENCE

Some years ago (I think at the Furman Pastors School) I heard a famous Old Testament scholar lecture on the book of Job, the Bible's most extended wrestling with the problem of evil. After Job's life has fallen apart, the text says, "[Job's friends] sat with him for seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great." (RSV, 2:13)

"And that," said the scholar, "is the last thing they do right in the whole book." For the rest of the book Job's friends blame him for his suffering and offer neat explanations, which do not touch his pain, for the inexplicable.

Every tragedy prompts questions of "why." The shootings at Virginia Tech are no exception. We have asked what could have been done to make our campus safer. We have wrestled with the cosmic questions of how to make sense of such carnage. Surely it is natural and appropriate to ask these questions.

But there is a deep wisdom in the Job story that we clergy and counselors have discovered in our ministry to and with the Virginia Tech community. Sometimes all you can do is let go of your need to have an answer and be willing to share the pain of those around you. Only by sitting in the darkness with the devastated do you gain the right to finally point to the shafts of light that a religious tradition can offer to the community as it gropes its way forward.



Although I do not want to oversimplify a complex issue, it seems to me that the choice you make for 32 or 33 victims suggests whether you understand evil as part of the community or something external to it.

The day after the shootings a plague of free-agent clergy descended on our campus, offering amazing and appalling insights into the mind of God: This was God's judgment on the wild partying at universities. This was part of God's great plan to turn America to repentance.

I think it is significant that these believers were more comfortable constructing a monstrous (but at least in-control) god than with sitting in humility before the incomprehensible horror.

Our culture assumes every problem has an answer and every event an explanation. Tragedy reminds us that much of life truly is mystery. I believe Christian faith offers a response to such mystery, but it is the paradoxical answer of Emmanuel, "god with us." It is the hidden hope on the other side of Christ crucified. If we are interested in the healing of the community, rather than in keeping our own anxieties at bay, there is no alternative to sitting awhile in silence.

LONGING FOR LITURGY

I do not know how it felt to those watching Virginia Tech's April 17 convocation on television, but to those of us in Cassell Coliseum one moment was most electric. After all the music, readings and speeches were over, a student somewhere in the crowd bellowed, "Let's go Hokies!" His cry

was immediately answered by five rhythmic claps — just like on a Saturday afternoon in Lane Stadium, with fourth and inches to go on the goal line.

The call and response grew louder with every repetition until it was impossible to hear anything else. There was something primal in the cheer, as if by yelling loud enough we could vanquish the pain. To join in that chant was to be melded into a community of suffering and buoyed along by its defiance in the face of adversity. Since that day I have thought a lot about why, at a moment of great anguish, we turned to a football cheer.

Positively, the spontaneous cheering speaks to the deep need for ritual and language capable of expressing common pain and hope. The demise of religion has been periodically predicted for a long time. Yet tragedies such as the Tech shootings remind us that there is a deep yearning for meaning that transcends individual experience. Theologian Paul Tillich observed that a basic way we find the "courage to be" is by being part of something bigger than ourselves. We long for and need that which joins us to others and allows us to share both our weaknesses and our resources.

That the community turned to a football cheer for its liturgy also emphasizes our lack of language and images sufficiently broad to encompass multicultural communities such as a research university. It was the lowest common denominator, the closest thing to a *lingua franca* that the campus could find to express its solidarity — and it was football.

There was a time when our culture could draw on a common store of scripture, tradition and prayer to express itself. No more. The prevailing milieu is increasingly secular and religiously diverse. You need not long for a return to militant, imperious Christendom to bemoan the loss of shared language that is robust and profound enough to allow the community to mourn, and ultimately rejoice, together. An ongoing challenge in Blacksburg is finding the words and rituals that will allow us to heal together, and this search reflects a quest in the culture at large.

33 OR 32?

Virginia Tech was originally a military school much like Virginia Military Institute or The Citadel, and as such it is built around a drill field. On the edge of the drill field, halfway down the side, is a stone reviewing stand that has long been the place around which most outdoor university rallies, protests and public gatherings center. So it was not surprising when, immediately following the shootings, a makeshift shrine and memorial garden arose at the reviewing stand.

The Tech campus is architecturally unified by the use of gray limestone, called "Hokie stone." Fittingly, 32 Hokie stone fragments were arranged in a semi-circle in front of the reviewing stand, one for each person killed by Seung Hui Cho. Around each stone mourners placed flowers, pictures, notes and other remembrances. Overnight another stone appeared in the formation, marked for Cho. That stone was stolen — and then restored.

For a few days there was a visible tug-of-war on the drill field over whether the tragedy claimed 32 or 33 victims. That debate continues. And the controversy reflects a deeper struggle with such fundamental questions as the nature of evil and the possibility of forgiveness.

There are many dimensions to the question of whether 32 or 33 persons should be remembered. Whatever you decide, many would argue

passionately for the alternative. Although I do not want to oversimplify a complex issue, it seems to me that the choice you make for 32 or 33 suggests whether you understand evil as part of the community or something external to it.

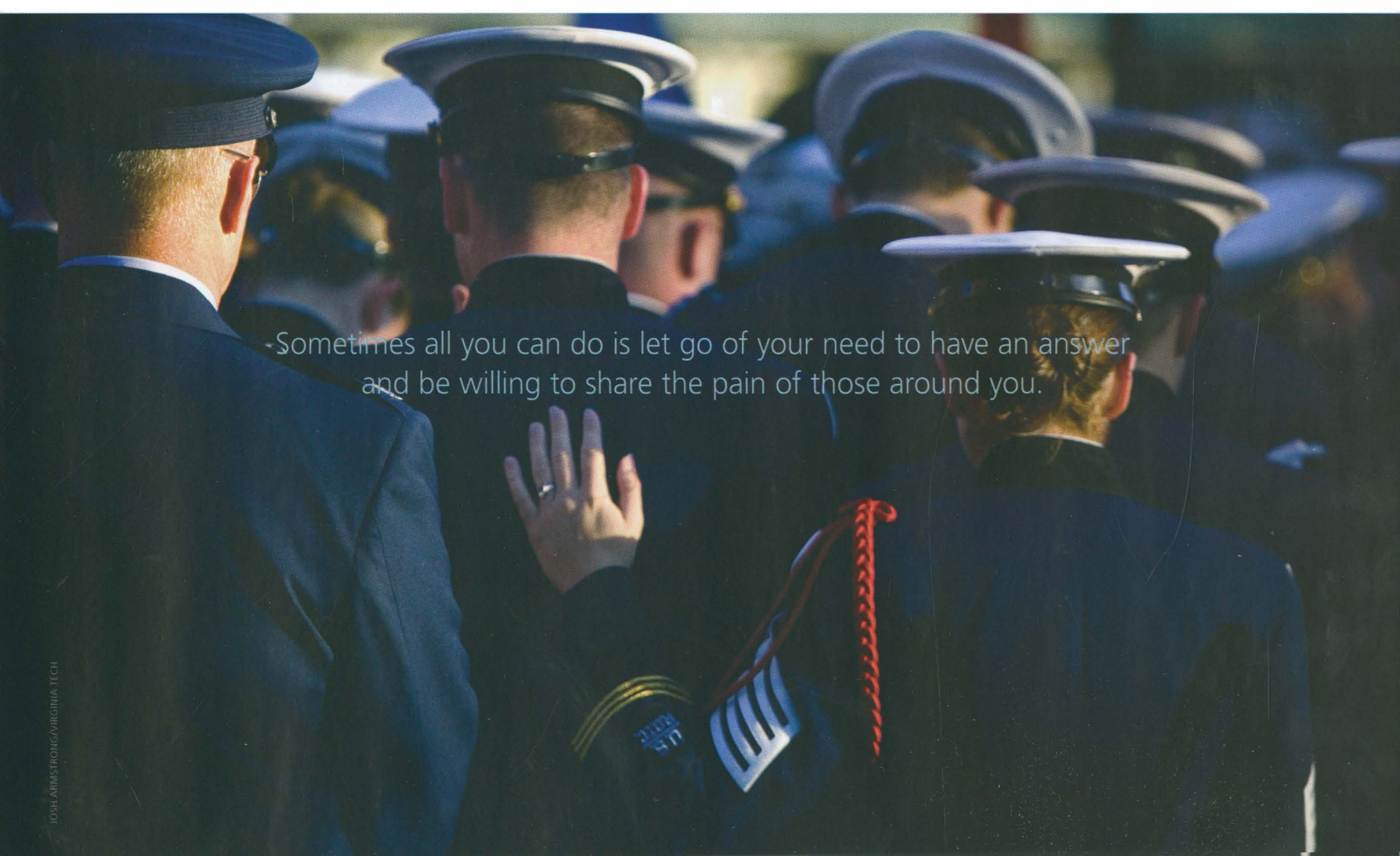
Since the shootings, there has been a great deal of anguish at Tech over how they could have happened. How could such a disturbed individual have been on campus for so long without someone taking decisive action? There is a certain consolation in imagining that Cho was so wholly other, so totally different from the rest of the community, that nobody could have imagined the depth of his suffering and malevolence. Like some sort of horrible virus, he invaded the campus body and unleashed a virulent poison that took a terrible toll. One does not recognize ties to a virus — or give it a stone.

It is much more troubling to acknowledge Cho as part of the community — as much a part of the campus as the Greeks, the honor societies and the campus ministries. If we do so, then Cho is not an invader. He is a wounded part of the body which we have failed to notice, much less heal. We prefer to think of Cho as totally unlike ourselves. But if we acknowledge him as a part of the university he becomes a mirror of the alienation, rage and despair many of us feel, to a lesser degree, at one time or another.

Cho's pathology was extreme, but it was not a singularity. As is often observed by those who work in student services, a university is neither better nor worse than the society that sends students to it. Nothing is easier than vilifying Cho as the perpetrator of a heinous crime. When we call him a victim — and give him a stone — we are forced to acknowledge some measure of responsibility for him as a fellow pilgrim in life.

The permanent memorial erected by the university, which replaces the shards of stone, has 32 markers. Given the political realities, I am not sure it could be otherwise. Emotions are so raw and the climate so litigious that compassion for the perpetrator is not something the official memorial may easily express.

One of the gifts of most Blacksburg churches to the healing of the community has been to speak gently, but consistently, of 33 victims. We do so not because Cho deserves forgiveness, but because the alternative to seeing him as the 33rd victim is to be captive to futile rage and party to the lie that he was not part of us. In trying to acknowledge and forgive him, we begin to forgive ourselves for not seeing and responding to his suffering.



Sometimes all you can do is let go of your need to have an answer
and be willing to share the pain of those around you.



THE VALUE OF EDUCATION

Early in my ministry at Virginia Tech I asked an engineering professor if he ever talked about ethics in his class. “Not much,” he said. “Every minute talking about that means I don’t talk about something that will make our graduates more marketable.”

Leaving aside the question of whether ethical engineers are not indeed more valuable over the long haul, his response illustrates a major issue: Is the purpose of a college education primarily training or education? Is the essential responsibility of a Virginia Tech (or a Furman) to give graduates marketable skills, or is it to equip them with the tools and vision to deal with challenges which they cannot yet imagine? The choice is not simply either/or, of course — I’m glad my degree has allowed me to feed and house a family — but the tension exists.

It would be hard to deny that the inexorable trend is toward greater emphasis on training. A well-known national survey indicates that both incoming students and their parents list “being financially well off” as their number one expectation for attending college, and given the skyrocketing cost of education, such a response is not terribly surprising. Colleges are no more immune to market forces than carmakers, and they respond accordingly by hawking job placement statistics.

But a crisis such as the Tech shootings exposes the myopia of offering students only training.

Education is what allows persons to live with complexity, to understand that simple answers are not always forthcoming. Education provides perspective and awareness that others have faced similar challenges in the past and found a way forward. Education makes the treasures of wisdom and knowledge from generations past available in the present. Education frees the imagination to find words to name the common experience. Education creates what you might call the habits of discernment, a way of being in the world which does not fear the new, the unfamiliar or the novel.

The vision that has traditionally marked a liberal arts education is valuable when the world is in flux, as it always is. Each day does not bring the cataclysm of a 4/16, but we are constantly rebuilding meaning out of the rubble of ideas that no longer seem adequate.

I do not remember much information from my time at Furman, but every day I draw on the love of language I learned in John Crabtree’s Shakespeare class, the ability to tolerate ambiguity I learned in Doug MacDonald’s and Jim Edwards’ tag-team introduction to philosophy, and the passion for learning that political scientist Jay Walters embodied. We leave our students horribly vulnerable in times of crisis if all we do is make them marketable.


WELCOME TO OUR WORLD

The day the *Roanoke Times* headline screamed “33 Victims,” National Public Radio carried a brief story that 33 had died in a car bombing in Iraq — as they had done the day before, and the day before, and the day before. . . .

I would hardly minimize the suffering of my community, but it is not hard to imagine those living in crime-infested tenements of our inner



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A photograph of Nikki Giovanni speaking at a podium. She is an older Black woman with short, light-colored hair, wearing glasses, a dark suit jacket, a light blue striped shirt, and a dark tie. Her mouth is open as if she is speaking passionately, and her right hand is raised. A microphone is in front of her. The background is a blurred crowd of people, many wearing blue. A small blue flag with a yellow tassel is on the left. A gold pin on her jacket reads "HOKIES".

Nikki Giovanni's concluding words, "We will prevail; we are Virginia Tech," have become a secular liturgical formula.

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cities, the deserts of Darfur or the alleys of the West Bank saying, "Welcome to our world."

The resurrection hope I preach in the context of a public university is rooted in the conviction that all suffering can finally be redeemed, that out of death new life can emerge. If there is a gift that 4/16 has given the Virginia Tech community, it is a renewed awareness that we are indeed part of a larger worldwide fellowship that bleeds and weeps and finally looks to laugh again.

Anyone who has spent pleasant hours walking on Furman's lush campus can appreciate better than most the seductive temptation to retreat from the world's suffering. But such retreat is ultimately stunting, and it is indeed a bittersweet gift to be drawn out of ourselves by shared pain.

For those who watched Tech's convocation on April 17, the part they probably remember is Nikki Giovanni's stirring poem. Giovanni's concluding words, "We will prevail; we are Virginia Tech," have become a secular liturgical formula. However, the words I most value, because they put the tragedy in perspective and invited us to feel kinship with other sufferers, came earlier:

"We do not understand this tragedy. We know we did nothing to deserve it, but neither does a child in Africa dying of AIDS, neither do the invisible children walking the night away to avoid being captured by the rogue army, neither does the baby elephant watching his community being devastated for ivory, neither does the Mexican child looking for fresh water, neither does the Appalachian infant killed in the middle of the night in his crib in the home his father built with his own hands being run over by a boulder because the land was destabilized. No one deserves a tragedy."

"No one deserves a tragedy." She's right. Blacksburg and Virginia Tech are in the process of learning a lot of lessons from 4/16. None, I think, is more important than this one — or has greater potential to help us redeem that day. ¶

The author graduated from Furman in 1974 with a degree in political science.